
STATUS OF

GEOGRAPHY

IN SDA ELEMENTARY
AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN
THE NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

By Wilfred W. Liske

Geography education in America has been under fire for some time. Here are two recent examples:

In January 1988, the *National Geographic Magazine* featured an editorial entitled, "Sounding an Alarm for Geography Education."¹

The April-May 1988 *Journal of Adventist Education* carried an article entitled, "Geography Education: A Critical Need," in which Cyril E. Roe, a college professor of education, sounded an alarm for Seventh-day Adventist geography education:

The Seventh-day Adventist Church cannot properly conduct its worldwide, God-given responsibilities if its young people are never seriously challenged to study the world in which we live, the different cultures and the many economic and climatic factors that affect the spread of the gospel.²

Dr. Roe pointed out serious weaknesses and suggested curriculum improvements. His suggestions included the following areas: making geography a subject in its own right, emphasizing the work and needs of the church, and expanding the offerings at the academy level.

How do the people working directly in the schools view the adequacy of geography education? This question should give us some insight into the strengths and weaknesses of Adventist

Eighty percent of those surveyed thought students were not being adequately prepared to deal with life through the geography instruction they receive.

geography education in North America.

During the spring of 1989 the author with assistance from the Geography Department at Andrews University carried out a survey to ascertain the feelings and perceptions of school administrators and teachers regarding the status of geography education in SDA schools in North America. A small grant to cover basic expenses was provided from Andrews University research funds.

Method of Investigation

An opinion questionnaire was developed to cover the following main areas:

1. The importance of geography as an area of study in the school curriculum.

2. Time given to geography in the curriculum.
3. The extent and popularity of geography offered in secondary data.
4. The adequacy of social studies textbooks in presenting geography concepts and skills.

Questions were constructed to explore these areas—some to be answered by indicating Yes, No, or Not applicable; and others by using a rating procedure. Opportunity was given for respondents to comment on each question. A final section contained open-ended questions inviting reactions and suggestions.

A total of 1,500 questionnaires were mailed out to all Seventh-day Adventist academies, junior academies, and a representative sampling of elementary schools in North America. Of these, 718 questionnaires were completed and returned: 260 from teachers, 47 from administrators, 404 from respondents who served both as teachers and administrators, and 7 with no teacher/administrator indication.

The in-school work experience of the respondents ranged from beginners to 40 years, with 15 years being the average. Nineteen of the respondents were in grades 1-6 schools, 406 in grades 1-8 schools, 94 in grades 1-10 schools, 30 in grades 1-12 schools, 84 in grades 9-12 schools

and 85 in schools with other classifications.

Results

Table 1 shows the total number of Yes/No responses and percentages of Yes and No answers in the various categories.

Question 1. Should geography be a separate subject in some grades in elementary schools (not just integrated into social studies)?

Seventy percent of the responses were positive. This percentage varied little between teachers and administrators. The result is somewhat surprising for the elementary group of respondents, as geography is usually part of the social studies curriculum. This American tradition is almost never questioned. A number of typical comments suggested separate geography classes for grades 5 or 6, and again in grades 7 or 8.

Some comments indicated that only the already-crowded curriculum might stand in the way of teaching geography as a separate subject. The traditional integrated social studies was described by many as being effective with younger learners, but that "Too often geography was lost in the shuffle."

Other comments included: "there is too much emphasis in grade school on social issues, which is irrelevant to a third grader for instance, and nothing on factual knowledge." "Students seem to grasp concepts more when

Only 17 percent of the respondents said their academy offered a geography course.

taught in greater concentration." The strongest comment was this: "Geography skills are abhorrent in all American schools, public and private. We need a separate subject for this area desperately."

A minority expressed support for the traditional integrated social studies with comments such as this: "Study of people, cultures, and society seems to be very much related to geography. It would be hard to separate the two." "Put it in with social studies. Students are better able to understand the applications."

Question 2. Should at least one geography course be required for a high school diploma?

Eighty-nine percent of the responses were positive. Teachers felt a little stronger on this point than did the administrators, probably because administrators immediately saw budget problems ahead if this were implemented. Typical comments by respondents included: "Especially in view of the international flavor of our society

and our church." "Minimum, a half year." "Losing touch with any subject area at the high school level is dangerous."

Question 3. Did you take a geography course in secondary school?

Only 31 percent could say Yes. It is interesting to note that a greater percentage of the administrators had taken a geography course. A number of respondents said that they would have taken a geography course if it had been available.

Question 4. Did you take a geography course in college? What course(s)?

Approximately half of the respondents answered positively. There was little variation between teachers and administrators. World Geography and Physical Geography were the courses most often taken. Introduction to Geography and Principles of Geography were also cited. A number of respondents mentioned that they enjoyed the college geography course.

Question 5. Are students being prepared for life adequately with the present geography education they are receiving in SDA schools?

Eighty percent of the respondents thought students were not being adequately prepared. Administrators felt very strongly about this. A total of 173 of the respondents wrote comments to qualify their answers. Typical comments were: "Depends on school and teacher." "I'm sure some are, but in

TABLE 1
Percentages of YES and NO Answers to Questions 1-11

QUESTION	Total Responses **	YES				NO			
		Teachers	Administrators	Both*	Total	Teachers	Administrators	Both*	Total
1. Should we teach geography as a separate subject?	686	71	77	68	70	29	23	32	30
2. Should we require geography for a secondary diploma?	692	91	78	68	89	29	13	57	11
3. Did you take secondary geography?	698	24	46	33	31	76	54	67	69
4. Did you take college geography?	703	49	50	49	48	51	50	51	52
5. Does the amount of geography taught adequately prepare students for life?	655	17	9	23	20	83	91	77	80
6. Is geography training needed for church mission?	677	92	91	93	93	8	9	7	7
7. Has your geography training prepared you to fulfill the church's mission?	671	69	80	71	71	31	20	29	29
8. Does your school offer geography for grades 9-12?	280	24	28	22	17	76	72	78	83
9. Do you like to teach geography?	591	94	100	98	96	6	0	2	4
10. Do SDA youth need more emphasis on geography?	681	91	93	90	90	9	7	10	10
11. Do you have to add material to the geography curriculum?	600	78	68	78	78	22	32	22	22

* The **Both** column refers to the respondents who were administrators and also taught in the school.
 ** Total responses include all respondents who indicated Yes or No, but does not include Not Applicable responses and questions left blank.

general I think they are not." "The entire world is now the neighborhood with the advantages in travel, communication and technology." "NO! NO! NO! I have felt strongly about this long before this survey."

Contrasting with the previous comments were a minority of status quo comments like these: "Quite well, always room for growth." "Our books are excellent. We are learning states, continents, and countries as early as grades 1 and 2."

Question 6. Do students need some training in geography in order to carry out the mission of the SDA Church?

The overwhelming response as expected from this somewhat biased and ambiguously stated question was positive (96 percent): "Definitely, yes! The Lord needs missionaries to spread the gospel of Jesus. Our church should have its own geography and all other social studies tests." There were a few who said No, one of whom commented, "Mission work can be carried out whether you know geography or not."

Seventy-eight percent of the teachers felt they needed to add materials to the geography curriculum.

Question 7. Has the preparation you received in geography prepared you to carry out the mission of the SDA Church?

Seventy-one percent said, "Yes, it has." Administrators responded more positively than teachers. This conflicts somewhat with responses on previous questions, which indicated a need for more geography instruction.

Could it be that many respondents felt that when they were in school more and better geography education was provided? One respondent expressed it this way: "I had very good geography teaching; this was before integration with social studies."

Many respondents qualified their positive answer with comments such as, "Only because I was interested in furthering my geographical knowledge by self-study." "I have done it on my own." "Schooling, probably not. My travels with my parents as missionaries did the most for me." Statements like these dominated the many comments on this question.

Other respondents commented: "It's hard to teach what you never learned." "It's been very beneficial. I wish I had had a stronger elementary course." "I feel a real lack in this area."

Question 8. Does your school offer a geography course(s) in grades 9-12?

Only 17 percent of the 280 responses were positive. Obviously this question was relevant to secondary schools only. Thus 409 responses indicated that the question was not applicable.

However, the low positive response indicates a lack of courses available. Few comments were made on this question. Typical ones included: "We will next year." "It is an elective and very few students take it." "We offer a course in global studies, which includes some geography."

Question 9. Do you like to teach the geographical aspects of social studies?

This question sought to analyze respondents' personal feelings toward

geography. Ninety-eight percent indicated that they enjoyed geography teaching. The administrators indicated an even stronger feeling than the teachers. The comments made supported the positive feelings: "I love it." "Yes, sometimes I feel like I must steal the time from some other discipline."

Question 10. Do SDA young people need a greater emphasis on geography?

Ninety percent indicated that they did. This response coincides with responses to previous questions on lack of preparation and courses offered.

Comments on this question included, "How can we expect people to have a mission-oriented outlook ...?" "To better understand our global work." "As it related to our mission, yes."

Question 11. Do you feel you have to supply extra geography material/con-

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tent etc., in your social studies teaching?

The responses to this question indicated that social studies textbooks seem to lack adequate geography emphasis. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents felt they needed to supply extra materials and content. More teachers than administrators answered Yes to this question.

Typical comments were: "Book requirements are not enough." "Every school must be adequately equipped the same as science and math and others." "Yes, our teachers have added much to the geography text."

The next four questions asked respondents to rate their answers on a given scale.

Question 12. On a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being the lowest) how would you rank geography in importance compared to the other subjects in the school curriculum?

The responses indicated that most respondents felt geography was somewhere in the middle with 74 percent in the 3-to-5 range. The rest of the responses were about evenly divided between those above 5 and below 3.

Administrators and teachers reflected an almost identical pattern of response. Comments included the following: "Less than religion, math, and reading, but more than art and other social studies areas." "If you're asking how it is ranked presently, I would circle No. 1. If the question is how it should be ranked, it should be higher." "Importance, unfortunately is not reflected in academy course offerings. Constraints are basically financial." "As important as others."

Question 13. What percent of your total social studies teaching would you estimate is devoted to geography?

The estimations varied greatly ranging from 0 to 60 percent, with a majority of respondents indicating 10-30 percent.

Qualifying comments indicated that many felt the amount of time was insufficient. Some felt guilty for taking more time than allotted at the expense of something else.

Question 14. What percent of all grade 9-12 students are likely to take one or more geography courses?

Seventy-eight percent felt that the proportion was 10 percent or less.

Question 15. What fractional part of the social studies texts you use this year is devoted to geography concepts?

Sixty-three percent of the respondents estimated that less than a quarter of the content was devoted to geography. Teachers and administrators gave similar responses.

Qualifying comments made by respondents included such statements as these: "Usually one chapter out of 10." "In my opinion the popular social studies series I use deals with history far more than geography. For example a prominent area in the U.S.A. has only three pages to tell about the region."

Question 16. If you feel geography needs to be emphasized more in SDA K-12 schools, how best can this be brought about? Any other comments are welcome.

Again the response was more than expected (55 typed pages of comments when compiled.)

Reactions to the survey ranged from a few wary comments such as, "I feel there is enough emphasis in K-12 that it should not be a cause for concern. Apparently this is another sector outcry." "It appears this is from a geography oriented person who is attempting to push geography," to enthusiastic outbursts of support like these: "Thank you for this opportunity to sound off. I've felt strongly about this for some time." "I'm pleased to see we are admitting we have a problem, and are trying to do something about it." "I am glad to see someone who is questioning our curriculum." "I was thrilled to receive this questionnaire. I surely hope this doesn't become a dead end." "I think this will be an eye-opener to educators." "This survey is long overdue. Congratulations, and I hope the survey will make an impact on the NAD, K-12 Board."

The supportive, positive comments dominated the responses by at least three to one.

These responses indicate a need to strengthen the geography program in secondary schools by increasing the offerings and requiring students to take at least one geography course. Two comments illustrate this perception: "A geography requirement for high school is appropriate." "As an administrator interested in curriculum, I highly support the concept of teaching geography to most high school students."

Some respondents drew attention to

the difficulties of adding anything more to an already crowded curriculum as in the following two statements: "Curriculum grows while time shrinks. How to squeeze in more emphasis on anything is a serious problem." "Geography needs proper emphasis, but let's not be reactionary and swing too far the other way."

The enthusiasm of the respondents shown toward this survey points to considerable interest among SDA educators in increasing and improving geography education in SDA schools. As one respondent remarked, "It's a start! Thank you for considering this subject in depth."

Has the time come for serious curriculum evaluation and planning in both the elementary and secondary schools? Obviously it has. □

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REFERENCES

¹ Gilbert Grosvenor, President of the National Geographic Society, Editorial, *National Geographic* (January 1988), n.p.

² Cyril E. Roe, "Geography Education: A Critical Need," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 50:3 (April-May 1988), pp. 11, 12, 36, 37.

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"not yet" having computers, or as "dying out."

Much prejudice exists in society because such views are still promulgated. Geographers are becoming increasingly aware of the ethnocentric biases of their own world descriptions. We can learn much from an attempt to study the values of others from as unbiased a viewpoint as possible. Christ taught the ultimate equality of all races—the family of God.

Service Learning

Curriculum developers have devised a number of strategies for incorporating values into their teach-